

“TRIUMPH OF THE HUMAN SPIRIT: AMAZING GRACE”

Genesis 45:4-8 (*The Message*)

June 4, 2017

⁸“Come closer to me,” Joseph said to his brothers. They came closer. “I am Joseph your brother whom you sold into Egypt. But don’t feel badly, don’t blame yourselves for selling me. God was behind it. God sent me here ahead of you to save lives. There has been a famine in the land now for two years; the famine will continue for five more years—neither plowing nor harvesting. God sent me on ahead to pave the way and make sure there was a remnant in the land, to save your lives in an amazing act of deliverance. So you see, it wasn’t you who sent me here but God. He set me in place as a father to Pharaoh, put me in charge of his personal affairs, and made me ruler of all Egypt.

Today we start a nine-part sermon and film series that I have titled, “Triumph of the Human Spirit.” Each week’s sermon will feature a separate theme and I will be using Biblical characters and the story told in the film to illustrate that theme. For those of you who have come to UCCPH since last summer, let me specially invite you to fully participate in this sermon series by attending church and by then attending the Sunday afternoon screening—or watching on your own—the film that serves as the sermon’s backdrop for the week.

We start Sunday at 4:00 with a potluck. At 5:00, we show the film in Fellowship Hall. All films are shown with closed-captioning and enhanced stereo sound. From 7-8:00, we discuss both the film and the sermon theme for that day.

With only a couple of exceptions, all films are rated PG or PG-13. I try to pick films that are appropriate in terms of language, violence, and adult situations, but the human situation is what it is, so some grace is appreciated in the movie selections. In any case, this fourth year of the summer film series is loaded with inspirational and interesting stories. The opportunity for you is to deepen your faith AND your fellowship by joining other church regulars and guests as together we explore these themes.

Tonight's film is "Lion." This true story has nothing to do with animals, but everything to do with survival—survival in the jungle of human life in the face of overwhelming odds. It is about a young boy who is lost and found and who again as a young man becomes lost in his own inner conflict, and then again finds his family. You can read about the film in your bulletin.

Today's Bible story is the Old Testament, or Hebrew Bible, narrative of Joseph, a young man who is lost and found and who then finds again his family. These two stories—one true, one a fiction based in truth, take place in lands well apart from ours, and several thousand years apart in time. Yet, what is the same in these two stories is the presence of God's amazing grace, the hope and assurance that no matter what smacks us in the face of our lives, God is with us.

These stories confirm for us that God is always sending grace to us, and that grace experienced and acknowledged will make us better humans.

As Christians, we have been guilty of claiming God's amazing grace for ourselves to the exclusion of other people of other faith traditions. This is both sin and folly. Long before the world ever heard of Jesus, God's grace was present and active in the lives of the most vulnerable persons, those least likely to survive tremendous, traumatic ordeals. And long after the time of Jesus, in cultures where people do not worship him or know of him, amazing grace appears still and takes many rescuing and healing forms independent of religious allegiances.

Such is the case in both the stories of Joseph and of Saroo. God's Amazing Grace enters their lives in profound and salvific ways:

(Julie sings) "***Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saves a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see.***"

Joseph, the apple of his father's eye, was but 17 years old when his brothers conspired against him to end his life. Jealous of his relationship with their parents, they kidnapped him and threw him in a pit to die. Later, they changed their evil plan and instead sold their brother as a slave to passing merchants. The price? Twenty pieces of silver.

If this image reminds you of the story of Jesus, good for you! This is an example of how the New Testament writers draw on their own ancient faith

traditions to tell their Jesus stories, tying all that tradition together with familiar themes: here, the betrayal of the Beloved for twenty pieces of silver.

Joseph is taken far away from his home, to Egypt. Again, through the intervention of God's grace, he not only lives, but is said by all accounts to thrive there. The scripture puts it this way:

As it turned out, God was with Joseph and things went very well with him. He ended up living in the home of his Egyptian master. His master recognized that God was working for good in everything Joseph did.

Amazing Grace. Amazing Grace kept Joseph alive in the pit, where he feared death. Amazing Grace kept Joseph, a slave, alive in captivity, where he feared cruel treatment. Amazing Grace kept Joseph alive in prison when he was wrongly accused of trying to seduce his master's wife, and where there he feared a permanent loss of his freedom. And Amazing Grace eventually put the young man Joseph, at age 30, in the position where he could transfer that amazing grace to those who needed it most. When a great famine struck Egypt and the surrounding region, it was Joseph who supervised the benevolent donation of grain to the starving people.

(Julie sings:) ***“’Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved; how precious did that grace appear the hour I first believed!”***

God's amazing grace was not lost on Joseph. He knew God's presence and hand in his life. He turned bad into good, hopeLESSness into hopeFULness for others. Once he believed that God stood with him in all things, he found peace. And it was this peace that he had found in God's Amazing Grace that allowed him to welcome back his brothers when they came to him desperately needing grain. It was the peace of God that helped him forgive his brothers for all they had done to him. Joseph, at long last, was able again to see his father, and to weep upon his shoulder with joy and thanksgiving. Amazing Grace.

(Julie sings:) ***“My God has promised good to me, who's word my hope secures; God will my shield and portion be, as long as life endures.”***

Saroo was only five years old when he mistakenly boarded a train near his home that kept him captive, alone and hungry, for 1600 miles. When the doors to the train car finally opened, he was in Calcutta amid a teeming mass of persons who spoke Bengali, not Hindi. He had no money; he could not communicate his need or his fear. He did not know the name of his hometown, and the only name he knew for his mother was, “Ammi,” or “Mum” in Hindi.

Unlike Joseph, Saroo did not know the Hebrew God. He came from a mixed family; his mother was Hindi and his father was a Muslim. He was trained in neither faith tradition. He knew neither the word nor the image of God. No

matter for God knew HIM. I cannot explain his survival any other way but than in words and images meaningful to me: 'twas grace, God's Amazing Grace, that saved this little boy from starvation, from sexual predation, from being kidnapped and sold into slavery—from spiritual and physical death.

Eventually, Saroo was taken to an orphanage and there, through more Amazing Grace, he was adopted by a loving and supportive Australian couple who felt it was their calling to do so. Sue Brierley, played masterfully in the film by Nicole Kidman, had experienced something akin to a breakdown at age 12, during which time she had a vision. Saroo writes in his memoir, *A Long Way Home*, that his adoptive mother described it this way:

It left her feeling like an electric shock had gone through her. The vision was of a brown-skinned child standing by her side—she sensed it so keenly that she could even feel the child's warmth. It was so striking she wondered about her sanity, and even whether it was possible she'd seen a ghost. But as time went by, she became more comfortable with her vision and came to accept it as something precious, a visitation of some sort that only she knew about. It was the first time in her bleak life that she'd experienced an overwhelming feeling of something fortuitous, and she held on to it.

Is this her own Amazing Grace experience? Isn't that what she is describing here? It seems to me that Amazing Grace IS a visitation—a completely unexpected, oft-times sanity-questioning, marvelous intercession of God into our lives. It is a decisive moment where your life's course is changed and where your

purpose is made clear. It is that moment of clarity and resignation where, to save your LIFE, your self-determination has to be turned over to your Higher Power, when you find yourself on your knees or prostrate on the floor with anxiety, fear, and displacement, where your heart is breaking and your mind is searching and your gut is aching and your whole being is crying out to the God of your understanding for help! For redemption! For transformation! For grace. For Amazing Grace.

(Julie sings:) Through many dangers, toils and snares, I have already come; 'tis grace that brought me safe this far, and grace will lead me home.

Grace. Amazing Grace. And Google Earth! Human agency. Somebody who never had heard of Saroo or of Saroo's torment had designed a computer program called Google Earth, and across the wireless internet world of human creation, Saroo finds his crowning Amazing Grace moment. He finds home.

We are freely given God's Amazing Grace, but it is up to us to accept it, to give thanks for it, and then to run like the wind with it. That is what the hymn that Julie is singing for us this morning is talking about. When John Newton wrote in 1779 about his experience of grace, he was a changed man, a minister and slavery abolitionist who had previously worked FOR the human slave trade as a

hand on a slave ship. He wrote the hymn to God in his anguished search for why he had been saved from drowning during a storm at sea. Why him? What was he but a wretch, a low-life unworthy of God's intercession?

The hymn is not about salvation, in the eternal sense. It's about transformation in the here-and-now-look-at-the-amazing-things-God-is doing-in-my-life sense. It is about recognizing your story and God's grace in your story. It's about how, having recognized that you have been literally and figuratively "saved" by this grace, your life MUST change, how it has been transformed by this experience of God, no matter what you call it, no matter how you are raised to understand it and, no matter how you express your devotion to it.

(Julie sings:) "When we've been there ten thousand years, bright shining as the sun, we've no less days to sing God's praise than when we'd first begun."

You don't have to be Christian to experience this Amazing Grace of God, but as Christians we understand it concretely in the form of Jesus our Christ, a man who was the embodiment of God's grace in action. Jesus points us to this gift from God, but compels us to take the gift and to pass it on, not hoarding it like Willy Wonka's Golden Ticket into the Chocolate Factory of heaven, but rather as a daily reminder that God's love and charity, compassion and justice is to be shared,

and not just with our own kind. As it is freely and universally given to us by God, we should freely give it universally to others.

I thank Julie this morning for reminding us through song and verse about this powerful lesson, and I give thanks to God for extending to us all the opportunity of God's Amazing Grace.

Join us tonight, won't you?

May It Be So.